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On the Red Line

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On the Red Line

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B.A.S. Psychology, Northwestern University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted to The Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

“On the Red Line” is a short story collection interested in Black, queer men and women who are on the verge of major points of change or transition in their lives. At the core of their struggles is a sense of urgency to escape trauma, and a need to fulfill their innermost desires. Major themes of this collection include: isolation, identity, trauma, loneliness, and mental illness. These are predominantly coming-of-age stories that center a particular population that is often marginalized in mainstream literature.

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On the Red Line

A tornado of candy wrappers, newspaper ads, and empty plastic bottles race around the Howard train station, propelled by the frigid Chicago wind. The night feels eerily mute and still, as if the entire city is bogged down by some internal contemplation. There are about a dozen other passengers waiting on the platform with Chris. They've just been notified of a brief delay, some technical malfunction to be addressed. Chris stands uncomfortably at the edge of the platform, his eyes focused on the tracks down below. His toes rest just over its side. Behind him, the other passengers huddle together underneath the large, overhead heating bulbs. Aside from the occasional sigh or grumble, everyone here is silent.

Chris's vision is blurred and unfocused. The wind cuts at the nape of his neck. Just like his mind tonight, he's been wandering aimlessly, looking for a release. All day, there's been a relentless tugging inside of him, a desire to make contact, to feel. Just an hour ago, he stumbled out of his Evanston apartment, trudging through the foot of snow coating the ground. Chris had no place to go, but this was of little concern to him. He simply walked, sinking further and further into the white, snowy abyss. The surrounding trees rattled in the wind, casting off flurries of flakes from their snow-burdened limbs. His face was wet and cold. His fingers stiffened and ached. But he nevertheless kept going. He saw only a handful of people out that night. Everyone marched quickly with purpose, apparently eager to get inside.

Tonight is yet another Friday night Chris finds himself riding the CTA trains through a city that isn't home. What had he expected to find six months ago when he arrived in Chicago with nothing but two duffle bags and seven-hundred dollars to his name? He no longer knows. He'd arrived that summer with an indistinguishable mix of excitement and fear, the kind of raw energy that reminded him that he was indeed a living and breathing person in the world. Before that moment, he'd spent several months in a numbed state, a long period of mourning that left him confined to the small, boxy space of his bedroom in St. Louis. His father had died just over a year ago after several years of battling lupus. For Chris, his father's death felt like a sudden abandonment, one in which he never truly expected to occur. Years of fluctuating health had desensitized Chris to the grave possibilities of his father's illness. He simply interpreted his father's last hospital visit as just another low point on his journey, that he would somehow inevitably get better again.

Dizzy, Chris wobbles on the platform, his body leaning forward towards the tracks. With the wind pounding at his back, he takes a small step backward to stabilize himself. Just then, there's a sharp tug on his left arm. Chris snaps around to look at the person with the strong grip—an older man who has yet to release his hand. The man's touch shocks him awake.

"C'mon over here. Walk this way," he says, pulling Chris towards him.

"You almost fell over the edge."

Embarrassed, Chris quickly glances around at the other passengers, but no one else seems to notice him. “No I wasn’t,” he says, sharply pulling his arm away but still complying. “I’m all right. I just slipped.”

“You drunk?” The man’s voice is deep and calm, the sound of a father addressing a son.

The thought of his own father seeing him this way unsettles Chris. He can almost see the strained look of disappointment in his father’s eyes—the same disappointment he’d had that day Chris was suspended from junior high.

It had been near the end of his seventh grade year, years before the lupus settled into his father’s blood and bones. Chris had been taking a beginners’ dance class where he took an immediate interest in the only other boy there: Tyrell Jamieson.

On the first day, Chris deliberately stood near the back of the dance studio, both for the sake of his own privacy and to watch Tyrell. He was enamored with Tyrell’s awkwardness: the way his long, skinny limbs flopped and fumbled about, the way he spoke very little and never raised his hand to answer a question or to volunteer to demonstrate a step, the way he mirrored Chris’s own perception of himself—quiet and timid. Chris, as if drawn by some gravitational force, found himself moving increasingly closer to Tyrell until he finally occupied the space next to him.

They became friends in the slow, gradual way one would expect from two quiet and shy thirteen-year-olds. Their connection started from a shared goal: to not look foolish in front of the entire class. So they helped each other out, filling in the gaps in each other's dance moves. Chris was a fast learner, but his execution was sometimes sloppy, but in contrast, Tyrell paid deliberate attention to form but often fell behind the pace of the rest of the class.

During lunch, they'd sit together, sharing a table with a few other people they didn't know. They never spoke to these other students, and sometimes they didn't even speak to each other, simply content with each other's presence. When they talked, it was always about video games and movies, what was coming out in stores, and what they wanted to see, and of course, dance.

But there was a point—sometime mid-semester—when Tyrell's mere presence made him nervous, resulting in a sudden, confusing urge to both be near him and run away. In class, Chris would ask Tyrell to be his dance partner, grabbing and squeezing his hands with excitement. Tyrell complied only twice, immediately stopping once all the girls started laughing at them.

On the day of the suspension, Chris cornered Tyrell in the bathroom after lunch, rushing in to plant a wet kiss near the sinks. Tyrell's dry lips were sealed tight, denying Chris's eager tongue entry.

The proceeding events all happened so quickly: the tussle, the growing audience of boys, the teachers that came to break them up. Tyrell pinned Chris

down on the piss-stained floor and punched him—twice in the jaw, once in the eye, and numerous other times everywhere else.

While following his father out to the car that day, Chris replayed all of their interactions, trying to find some red flag that he'd missed. There were definitely moments when he thought Tyrell was flirting with him. Mostly, it had been the way Tyrell smiled whenever he saw Chris, when at any other time his face seemed to be balled up in a frown, and how, whenever Chris looked at Tyrell, it was as if he could see right into his thoughts. In his eyes, he saw a mutual feeling of comradery and understanding, a kindness that held his gaze. But now, all he could imagine were dull, hard marbles staring back at him.

There was a brief second when he hesitated to enter his father's car, wanting instead to turn and run away. But there was no other place for Chris to go. No one else to turn to. He had no other relatives: no grandmother or grandfather, no uncles or aunts, no mother. According to his father, at least, they were all alone in this world, with no one but each other. And that was the way it would always be—until it wasn't.

Once in the car, Chris buckled his seatbelt then quickly turned his head towards the window, dreading whatever his father would say. He hadn't said a word to Chris since he'd arrived at the school, visibly grumpy from having to leave work early. His father remained silent for the duration of the car ride home, even after they parked in front of the house and got out.

Chris waited by the car while his father headed towards the porch steps. “Deddy?” he called out. He looked not at his father but at the chipped, wooden steps underneath his father’s feet. He hadn’t seemed to notice how worn down they were.

“Yeah,” his father said, pausing by the front door.

Chris had never explicitly told his father about his interest in other boys. It was just an open secret between them. His father never asked, and Chris never told. This was their way for everything. They hardly ever discussed anything of real substance, at least never at great length. Most of their conversations were a series of short utterances interspersed with brief moments of silence:

Did you like the movie?

No.

Why not?

Just ‘cause.

Well, I did.

“You mad at me, Deddy?” Chris asked, darting his eyes in his father’s direction then away again.

“No, Chris. Of course not.” His father only half-turning towards him.

He looked at his father's profile, at the pained but concerned expression on his face. He walked closer to him, stopping just in front of the porch steps where his father was standing.

"Be careful out here, Chris. It's not safe." His father almost whispers when he says this and then pauses as if considering the right words to say next. "You can't just go letting everybody know that about you. Can't just go running up and kissing boys like that."

"But he was my only friend..."

"You think that's what friends do? Have you seen me kiss Charles or any of my other friends?!"

There it was: anger. Chris knew it was coming, knew the yelling would start. "Ugh...no."

"Just because you friends," his father goes on, looking directly at him now, "don't mean you each other's lil' *boyfriend*. You're in for a whole lot of trouble thinking that, boy." He turned away and walked inside, the conversation over as quickly as it started.

Chris sat outside a while after this, hoping the cool, spring air would calm him. Sometime after school was over, he saw a young sister and brother walk home from the bus stop across the street. They immediately threw their backpacks down for a game of catch, picking up a tennis ball that had already been on the ground. Chris watched them for minutes as they threw the ball back

and forth to each other. As if noticing this, the siblings asked him to join them, but Chris quietly said no and went inside.

On the platform, Chris shoots another look at the strange man watching him before walking over to an empty bench. The man looks middle-aged—maybe forty. Handsome, with large brown eyes and a thick beard speckled with a few strands of gray. He's dressed in heavy denim and what appears to be workman's boots. Rashaad. He looks like a Rashaad.

As Chris takes a seat on the cold bench, Rashaad walks and stands to the side of him, waiting for an answer to the question Chris has already forgotten.

"Are you drunk?" he repeats.

"Oh, no," Chris lies. "I've had a couple. But I'm not drunk."

"Yeah, probably a couple too many," Rashaad says.

Chris feels Rashaad examining him, perhaps noticing the way his body sinks into itself, and the lifelessness in his eyes. He tries to sit up straight.

"Is someone expecting you somewhere?" Rashaad asks.

Chris doesn't respond.

"Well, just stay away from the tracks, ok?" Rashaad says before walking back towards the heating bulbs. He is gone before Chris can think of the right words to say. He should've said *something* else to Rashaad, something kind.

Thank you? No, no, that would be admitting too much. As usual, words fail him. He pulls out his small bottle of rum from the pocket of his coat and takes another sip. It warms his throat. Any minute now, the train will come, he hopes. Any damn minute now.

Someone lets out a sharp cry on the opposite platform just moments later. It's an elderly man rummaging through his big brown sack of stuff. He has to be in his late sixties, Chris decides. Maybe older. The man shows all the signs of homelessness: clothing that hangs from his spindly body like rags, a thin blanket draped over his shoulders, a bag containing everything that he owns. Vincent. That will be his name.

Old man Vincent seems frustrated. He angrily dumps out the contents of his bag, each of his trinkets rolling about on the grimy platform. Groaning, he kneels down to finger through each precious artifact, garnering little attention from the other passengers nearby. Vincent doesn't seem to be able to accept his loss, unable to understand how he could've left the item at some other place, at some other train station. *Had it fallen out somewhere in the snowstorm?* he must be asking himself. *Was it buried someplace deep?*

Chris almost wants to help the man retrace his footsteps. But he doesn't.

Vincent eventually gives up on his frantic search. He neatly scoops up his things one by one, grabbing one item here and one item there, as if a certain

order must be followed. When he is finally finished, he sits down in his corner of the platform, far away from everyone else.

Another day, another possession lost.

Much to Chris's surprise, Rashaad returns. "Well I'm gonna miss the fight tonight," he says, almost grunting. "I swear every time it gets cold the L wants to fuck up." He takes a seat next to Chris on the bench. "Can't ever count on the CTA for shit. Can you believe this?"

"Nah, it's crazy." Chris can feel Rashaad looking closely at him now as he tries his best to avert his gaze. He doesn't want Rashaad peering into his eyes. Men like Rashaad, those "tough, rugged" types, like his father's old friends, would immediately see right through him, his secrets spilling out for them to see. When he was younger, they all wore the same curious expressions around him, looking at him in bewilderment as if attempting to decode some deep mystery. This was especially true whenever they tried to impress upon Chris their "masculine wisdom:" how to get girls (which ones to go after, which ones to leave alone), how to establish the appropriate male image (to garner respect from his peers), and which vocational schools to apply to after high school. Chris just waited for the appropriate moments to nod his head in agreement and waited until they grew tired of talking, never once looking them in the eye.

"Hey. Did you hear me?" Chris hears Rashaad say now.

“Huh?” A tear rolls down Chris’s face. He quickly wipes it away with the back of his cold, bare hand.

“I was saying...do you have any big plans tonight?” Rashaad laughs. “You seem out of it. Are you okay?”

Chris opens his mouth, and a loud gasp threatens to escape his throat. He tries not to choke up when he speaks. “No. Not really. I don’t know. Maybe Boystown.”

Chris still hasn’t decided on a destination. Nevertheless, he usually finds himself wandering the streets of Boystown, watching the men loiter around the bars, laughing and carrying on. They’re all so fascinating to him, yet incomprehensible. It’s as if all of them are privy to some inside secret that Chris has yet to learn. They navigate the gay world so fluidly, going from one space to the next with apparent ease. Young men kissing complete strangers in and out of bars. Others walking hand and hand with their partners, deeply in love (*or lust*). He’d watch these men carefully, trying to picture himself travelling among them. But the image never fully renders.

“Oh really. Boystown,” Rashaad says. “That’s cool.” Something in Rashaad’s voice tells Chris he isn’t shocked by this fact. “So I’m guessing you like to dance?”

“Not really. I’m not a dancer,” Chris says. In fact, the only time Chris even gets the courage to dance these days is after taking multiple shots of tequila.

He'll stumble over to some empty corner of one of the bars and start grooving to whatever is playing over the speakers. Eyes closed, he imagines himself in junior high again, dancing with Tyrell in dance class. That's the only time he thinks of him, these moments alone on the dance floor. Nevertheless, something always breaks his trance. Someone will either bump into him, or as is most often the case, Chris will see the image of Tyrell on top of him, punching and punching away at his face.

"I'm headed home myself," Rashaad continues. "Long day tomorrow. But um...wait." He leans in, whispering. "Are you crying?"

Chris doesn't dare look at him. He quickly straightens up and pulls down his hood. "I'm fine."

"Hey, I don't mean to get in your business, but is everything alright?" Rashaad repeats. "You're out here alone and..."

Although Rashaad is whispering, it still feels too loud. Chris is crying harder now, sure that everyone at the station can hear. "No, no. I'm okay," he says. "I'm just having a bad day. I'm good. *For real.*"

"Well...alright. But you're too young to be feeling sad on a Friday night. Go out and enjoy yourself." He laughs awkwardly.

The discovery of Chris's gloom only seems to be heightening it. For the first time, he looks directly at Rashaad. "I guess," he blurts.

Rashaad doesn't go. He just starts speaking even more, pausing multiple times, as if considering his words carefully. "I mean it." He says to Chris. "I've been feeling pretty down myself lately too, maybe you can somewhat relate to it. Or not. I don't want to assume."

"Assume?" Chris asks.

"You see," he goes on, ignoring him, "My wife and I are divorcing. She found out I was gay. And we got kids. Two sons. And I have no idea how to tell them, but...I...ugh, never mind. I don't know why I'm even telling you this. You don't know me from a damn can of paint."

"Why *are* you telling me this?" Chris's abrasive tone belies his sudden interest. In all of his time in Chicago, he has yet to have such a personal conversation with another gay man. To think that a man like Rashaad went through the world pretending, marrying and giving birth to a life he probably never wanted in the first place, was an awful fate even Chris couldn't imagine for himself. He'd honestly rather die.

"I just noticed something," Rashaad says, looking into space. "I think that's the first time I've been able to call myself that word: gay. Damn."

On the other platform, Old Man Vincent cries out again.

"My wife begged me to admit that to her," he continues, talking as much to himself as he is to Chris at this point. "But I couldn't."

"She caught you with a man?"

Rashaad's eyes widen at this question. "Not exactly. She found some texts in my phone, later, some emails. It went down from there."

"That sucks." Chris's stomach flutters as his entire body buzzes with alcohol. "I don't know what I would do." He didn't. It was bad enough having only himself to deal with, let alone a whole wife and kids too. "I'm kinda gay. But I've never been with a man." That is all he can think to say at this moment, and he instantly regrets it. *I'm kinda gay*. What an idiot.

"Kinda?" Rashaad laughs, but quickly stops when he sees that Chris doesn't do the same. "If only I was *kinda* gay. I probably wouldn't be in this mess now. But yeah, I figured that. You mentioned Boystown. I saw the black paint on your nails. I figured I might have an open ear then."

Chris wipes his eyes, almost laughing. He examines the chipped paint on his nails, the one avenue of expression he's allowed himself. "So...you've been checking me out this whole time?"

"Well no, not exactly," Rashaad says. "I guess that came off wrong."

The conversation lulls after this. Chris turns his attention to his dark, dry hands, wishing they would somehow grow large enough for him to hide behind. And Rashaad, with his secret finally revealed to both Chris and the world, seems to have nothing else to share.

When the loud whooshing sound of the train finally announces its arrival, Rashaad gets up and reaches for Chris's hand. "Take care of yourself man," he says.

"You too," Chris says, reciprocating the gesture, feeling, once again, at a loss for the appropriate words. His hand feels limp under the firmness of Rashaad's grip. When Rashaad goes to board the train, Chris balls his hand up as if to shake off his touch, but the weight of Rashaad's hand lingers. As the doors of the train open, Chris feels a rush of nerves in his chest.

He walks quickly after Rashaad, boarding the same train car as him, finding an empty seat in the back, about six rows away. His legs shake as he lowers down to sit. He doesn't know why. It's not like he's going to *do* anything. This is just a little thing he pretends to do, a little lie that he tells himself. It's the same lie that propelled him to Chicago in the first place: that he will stop waiting and act.

"*This is a Red Line train,*" the man on the intercom starts as they take off towards 95th and Dan Ryan. A common refrain Chris knows by heart.

Between Chris and Rashaad there are several people: a trio of college students, a musician with his suited guitar, and a young girl with her father.

"Daddy, when will we get home," the little girl says. "I'm soooo tired."

"Soon sweetie," her father says, completely absorbed into his cell phone.

After twenty minutes and eleven stops, Rashaad stands up and holds onto the rail. He will be getting off soon. Chris searches his mind frantically for something to say, words that will prolong his stay. *Does Rashaad know any nice places to eat? Does he know how to get to Wrigley Field?* But before he can think, Rashaad moves closer to the door. Chris quickly moves up two rows, then, after another stop, a third. Luckily, Rashaad doesn't turn around.

"Hey guy."

Chris whips his head around. "What?" He blurts out. But he sees that it's only the little girl. She and her father are now two rows behind him. The father doesn't look away from his phone.

"Umm—muh," she says, "why do you keep moving up seats?"

Did Rashaad hear her? Chris checks. No. He's still standing by the door, looking out of the window.

"Is this a game? Can I play?" The girl continues, her mouth as wide as it is loud.

"No Darla, you can't," her father finally says, phone still planted in his face. "Now leave that man alone."

The little girl frowns, but quickly complies.

When Chris turns back around in his seat, Rashaad is gone. The doors of the train are wide open. Chris looks and sees him heading towards the steps.

“Doors closing,” the pre-record announces says just before the doors start to close.

Chris makes a leap for it, but he is too late, barely missing his chance. Too embarrassed to yell, he starts banging on the door, desperately hoping that the train conductor hears him and lets him out.

“Hey!” The little girl shouts. “The man needs to get out!”

The train doors jerk back open then, and Chris races out onto the platform. He jogs down the slick steps of the Belmont station, almost falling down twice. When he exits onto the street, he scans the area for Rashaad, quickly spotting him on the opposite sidewalk. Without so much as a glance in either direction, Chris runs across the street, barely missing the front end of a small sedan. The driver somehow manages to screech to a halt before hitting him. When Chris sees Rashaad turn around at this sudden noise, he immediately ducks behind a parked car.

The driver sits there and honks repeatedly at Chris, while an old woman with hard-boiled eyes shouts expletives from the passenger-side window.

Only after the car skirts off does Chris rise again, but by now, Rashaad is even further away. Chris walks briskly, his burning chest heavy with mucus, his congested nose runny from the cold. He pulls out another miniature-sized bottle of rum and gulps the whole thing down in one swallow before pulling out yet another.

Chris follows him as he turns the corner onto a residential street. No one else is around. He tries hard not to squeak in the icy slush but can't help but to do so anyway. After each block he walks in pursuit of him, he fights the urge to turn back around and go home. But no, no one's at home waiting for him. And definitely no one like Rashaad. But what will he do when he catches up with him?

It isn't long before Rashaad finally stops in front of what Chris assumes to be his apartment. Before Rashaad can even reach in his pocket for his keys, Chris runs up behind him, closing his eyes midway, as if this'll somehow make the next few moments any easier. But he opens his eyes when he starts to slip again.

"What the hell?" He hears Rashaad say.

Chris falls hard on a patch of ice, at the base of the steps where Rashaad is standing.

"What you doing following me to my damn place? Are you crazy or something?"

"I just came to ask you something," Chris says, struggling to get on his feet. "But, I—"

"But what?"

He finally stands, but doesn't know whether to run away or move in closer, so he stays put. "I just wanted to talk. Can we just go somewhere and talk? I have a lot on my mind right now and no one else to really talk to...no friends—"

“I don’t even know your name, son.” The man shakes his head while turning to open his front door. “And you damn sure don’t know me.”

Chris rushes in closer, stopping just a step down from where the man is standing.

“Hey!” The man pivots around. “Don’t run up on me like that.”

“I’m Chris...and you?” Chris reaches out a hand.

“I don’t fucking know you.”

“I’m sorry,” Chris mumbles, struggling to remain standing. He’s getting dizzy and has to place a hand on the cold, wet banister to keep from falling.

The man stares down at Chris, perhaps in awe, or in contemplation. “Step back,” he says. “Now.”

Chris kneels in front of him on the steps, sneezing and coughing. “Please, just hear me out, Rashaad.”

“Who the hell is Rashaad?” The man pulls a cell phone from his back pocket. “My name is Derek.”

“No, please, Derek! Don’t call the police. We can just go down the street over there to that restaurant.” He points to his left, to some restaurant that isn’t there.

Derek grabs Chris’s hand and pulls him to his feet. “Where do you live? I’m calling you a cab.”

"You sat down next to me at the station," Chris says, completely drunk now, but no less adamant. "And told me that sad ass story about your divorce and being gay...and, *and*" he pauses, conjuring up more conviction, "*this* can't be any stranger than that."

"I was venting to a stranger on my way home. *This* is a bit different—Oh, hello. Yeah, I need a cab—"

"Stop." Chris reaches to grab his phone, but misses as Derek pulls back.

Derek's grim expression sharpens to anger, his unencumbered hand quickly tightening to a fist before returning limp. He turns the knob of his front door and goes inside, leaving the door cracked just wide enough to maintain a clear view of Chris. "Yeah. It's near Sheridan," he's telling the operator now.

Chris can no longer stand. He stares at Derek from the steps, Derek's features growing increasingly vague around the edges. His fingers are freezing cold, but he doesn't feel them. Snow melts on his face, mixing in with the tears he isn't even aware are there. An image of the Howard Station comes to him, Derek's hand catching him just as he stumbled forward onto the tracks, before he inevitably died and went on to God knows where. Like some kind of divine intervention. "You were the only one who saw me," Chris slurs. "No one else saw me. No one else cared if I fell over..." He drifts off, resting his head against the banister, tears flowing and staining his coat. "That's gotta count for something," he says, as Derek hangs up the phone. "That has to mean something, right?"

“What has to mean something? What you talking about?” Derek returns, standing just outside of his front door.

“You were there for a reason tonight,” Chris says. It's beginning to snow again. Chris looks up at the sky, at the source of this sudden downpour. “I was supposed to meet you.” He tries to stand again, but immediately falters, falling back on the banister for support.

“Man, you losing it.” Derek walks over to try to get Chris to sit down, but to no avail. “Fine,” he says, giving up.

Chris turns away towards the street. He kicks at the steps below and watches as the snow flies up in bits. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happy.”

Derek sighs loudly. “And why is that?”

“Even when I was little.” Chris goes on, laughing; but the laugh is lifeless and flat. It quickly dissolves into silence. He looks at Derek. “Ain’t had one good relationship. Figures this wouldn’t work either.”

“And what did you expect to happen with me?”

“I don’t know, okay? It don’t matter now anyway.”

“God, you remind me of my oldest son.”

Chris kicks snow up the steps towards him. “So I sound like a child is what you’re saying?.”

“No,” Derek’s voice is calm and even. “He’s seventeen, so he ain’t too much younger than you. And he’s having a hard time in school. He’s a loner. Stays to himself a lot. And it’s taking a toll on him mentally.”

Chris, after a few moments, asks, “And what do you tell him?”

“That it won’t always be like this. That he’ll find his way. I try my best with him, but I don’t always say the right thing.”

“Must be nice.” Chris scoffs, kicking yet more snow in the air. “He’s lucky, I guess.”

“How so?”

“My father never really did that—talked to me. Well, except once years ago, but—it don’t matter now anyway. He’s dead.”

“Sorry.” Derek slowly rubs his gloved hands together to shake off the cold. “I understand you must be lonely, and I feel for that”—he looks down the street, after the sound of a passing car—“but you can’t just follow people home. You don’t know what I might’ve did to you.”

“I—” Chris begins but stops, no words left to say.

“I’ll tell you like I’d tell my son—”

“No, stop. It’s fine.” Chris burns with shame. How pathetic of him to be doing this. How stupid he was to think that this would work. Here he is on the porch of a man he met on a train, a man he’d named, a man he’d created for

himself. And here he is being confronted with the reality of it all: Derek isn't the man who will save him from himself. He isn't the one person who will change his life. And he hates Derek for this reminder. He hates him. There's no other way Chris can explain the sudden nausea, the pounding in his chest, his inability to breath or speak. "You should've just let me fucking fall," he barks, before folding over and vomiting on the steps. A mess of orange chunks sprays out into the snow.

"Ugh, shit," Derek says. "Come on. Just come on. Come inside." He grabs Chris's arm firmly, while making sure not to step in the mess. "I can't let you die out here on my porch." When they make it inside, he walks Chris down a long, narrow hallway to his bathroom.

"There's gotta be somebody I can call for you. *Somebody*. Right?" Derek stands in the doorway watching him puke into the toilet, his expression pensive and anxious.

"No..." Chris pauses, a string of spit hanging from his mouth. "I—ugh, fuck." Another round of vomit comes.

"What?"

"I'm a mess. A hot ass mess. I don't have anyone."

Derek leaves and returns with a towel to wipe the vomit from Chris's face. "You can stay here tonight," he says. He walks over and kneels beside Chris and wipes his mouth.

When Chris is finished, Derek walks him to the living room. It looks newly moved-in, furnished with only a gray couch and sofa. By now, Chris is fading, and lays mostly limp against Derek's side. He doesn't feel Derek release him, nor does he feel himself sinking into the large impressions of Derek's saggy, old couch—the one on which he'll sleep tonight. He doesn't feel Derek removing the wet, snowy shoes from his rigid feet. He doesn't see the pallor of his icy toes. Chris doesn't see or feel anything anymore, at least not tonight. And for now, that's okay. He only hears the hum of Derek's voice, his low, mumbled words, and the sound of another train passing nearby—its high-pitched squeal urgent and unmistakable.

Anchored

I can tell by Jason's jovial tone, as he talks endlessly about his new promotion, that everything in his life is happening as he wants it to. At the age of thirty-three, he's an HR partner at one of the biggest hospital systems in the Saint Louis region: SSM Health. He has a well-connected news-anchor-mother, who combats every obstacle that comes his way; an ever-growing list of friends I haven't met and don't care to. Oh, and of course there's me, the one he calls *the man of his dreams*, the one he's never put last, or even second. *Always first*. Jason says I'm the one who makes any of his happiness possible. I *take care of him* in a way he's never experienced before. I'm his first love, and every other cliché you can think of.

We're riding in the new BMW he bought today on impulse. He had a strong gut feeling about the job and just went for it, or so he told me when I first saw it approaching my mama's driveway. We're on our way to this new, fancy steakhouse that's just opened up in Frontenac. Mama's riding shotgun, while I sulk in the backseat. She's sitting so silently that I occasionally forget that she's even there. Jason's mother, Vicki, is meeting us at the restaurant for our weekly Sunday dinner. It originally began as a *Gays and Moms Do Brunch* outing (a name that Vicki came up with), but it eventually moved to dinnertime to better accommodate everyone's schedules.

I have some news of my own, too, but I'm not sure if I should even share it. I haven't told Jason, or anyone, that I applied to two universities back in

December: Washington University and Northwestern. It really started out as a joke, a way to confirm to myself that I didn't have what it took to get accepted by such prestigious schools. At twenty-four, I'm far removed from high school, far removed from the typical applicant. Although I made excellent grades back then, I just *knew* there'd be no way to account for those six years in between. I went through all of the necessary steps: took the ACT, applied for the FAFSA, contacted old high school teachers for recommendations (even my high school mock trial coach). Some remembered me well, others only vaguely. I did all of this work just to get an expected, definite *no*. But when I received the thick letter in the mail from Northwestern a week ago informing me that I made the cut, I buried it deep inside of our closet underneath stacks of clothes, hoping it would somehow disappear like socks in the laundry.

"You should come up and help me decorate my office tomorrow," Jason is telling me now, practically shouting. He's definitely an excitable person when he wants to be, which seems to be all the time these days. Whether it's intense sadness or joy, the emotion hits him all at once.

Just last week, he screamed at me for spending the night over mama's house instead of cuddling with him.

"You're never home now!" He'd yelled. "I'm tired of sleeping alone by myself. I got home and you weren't even there."

“My mama needs me,” is all I said before leaving the apartment once again to see mama. I’m tired of arguing, so I don’t.

But today, thankfully, Jason’s on the happier end of the spectrum. “It’s so big and empty,” He continues about the new office, gesturing now with one hand and steering the car with the other. “And you’re better than me at the decorating stuff anyway. It’ll be fun.”

“Oh please,” I say. “You decorated the whole apartment alone, and you did good enough with that, remember? It ain’t like you can’t handle a simple office. Besides, won’t that be weird? You know, us working for the same company? You being a higher-up. Me being the mail boy. Us being seen *together?*” Six months ago, Jason placed my application at the front of the line and got me an interview with the company.

“First of all, you do more than deliver the mail. Stop that. And second”—he laughs, pointing a finger at me—“only a few people at corporate know about us. And even if they all did, they couldn’t talk, because they’ve done/do the same thing. The old, straight men get away with much, much worse. Stuff that’s actually illegal. So, stop worrying about it!”

Instead of responding to Jason’s foolishness, I watch the back of mama’s head as she lightly leans against the window. In the last few years, she’s withered away into a such thin woman, one who oddly, when catching her in a certain light, and just at the right moment, somehow looks younger than before,

despite what she's been through. She used to be so stable, working double shifts as a registered nurse at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, participating in multiple committees at our church. But now, she only appears to be fine on the outside. But I know the truth. I spend so much of my time with her trying to somehow turn back time.

As we park in front of the restaurant, there's barely any light left in the sky. I get out of the car first and open the rear passenger door for mama to get out. And as I do this, she gives me that usual look of hers. That look conveying that *this ain't necessary. I'm the mama. Not you.* Most of our conversations now are a series of looks that we've both coded and memorized over the years. She's always been a woman of few words. So once she realized that she could manage just fine without using most of them, she did just that.

I let her walk first, while Jason follows behind me. Mama's wearing one of her best dresses tonight. It's the yellow, flowery one that cinches in at the waist and complements her frame. The hem stops just below her knees and flutters gently in the fall air when she walks. She trots along uncomfortably to the entrance of the restaurant wearing the three inch heels I bought for her once at a shoe store she said was too expensive. Not accustomed to ever wearing anything other than sandals and sneakers, she wasn't aware that women willingly spent so much money on footwear. We were at a mall in Atlanta at the time, visiting my father's family, all of whom we hadn't seen since his funeral in

2014. That was the last time she let me buy her anything new, and the last time that I tried.

Vicki is already waiting in the lobby near the door when we enter. She's wearing a short red skirt and a pair of Louboutin pumps that elevate her to my 6'1" height. Her slim face is *beat* with the latest cosmetics; her big nose contoured down to a thin beak; her wide eyes sit narrowly on her face, as if planted there haphazardly. And her long, graying, blonde hair, which she dyes and dyes endlessly, is combed back and teased. All of this gives her the appearance of something like a startled bird. And, for some reason that I have yet to learn, the Saint Louis viewers, those otherwise sensible people who tune in each morning to watch her report the news, find these features appealing. That's not to say that she's entirely ugly. / just personally find the arrangement of her face too distracting for television.

Vicki embraces mama tightly, rocking her from side to side, as if the two of them are old church friends. She then glances in my general direction, lightly tapping my shoulder before shifting right past me to Jason. "I'm so proud of you," she says to him in her anchorwoman's voice. "My son, beating the odds and making something of himself like I always knew you would."

Beating the odds is a common refrain of hers, one with a very specific and intended meaning embedded in its three words: *you are not a disappointment like your Black father, not like the 97.99% of the Black men I report on every day*

at work, and clearly, most importantly of all!, not like Keith, because I gave you the best White, middle class rearing I could afford.

She embraces mama again before the hostess guides us all to a small, intimate table towards the back of the restaurant. Once seated, Jason, mama, and myself peruse the menu while Vicki indulges in a glass of Merlot from a bottle already at the table. I can see her just over my menu sitting across from me, taking down large gulps of the deep red liquid. She's also glaring at me, but I pay her no mind and return to the steaks. I ultimately decide on the porterhouse.

"You sure that's what you want, Violet?" Jason asks mama after she tells the waiter she just wants the twenty-seven-dollar salmon. "You know you can pick anything from the menu."

"I'm sure," she says, with an unusual firmness. "Steak is too heavy for me."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I would've chosen somewhere else to go if—"

"She's fine, Jason," Vicki interjects. "Don't get yourself worked up." She's just finished her second glass, and her owlsh eyes are bucked.

"Your mother's right," I say, placing my right hand gently on his shoulder. He's a lot smaller than me, so the weight of my hand seems to always be firm to him. He eases under the pressure of it.

"The boy is exactly right. I *am* right." She avoids my eyes. "Listen to me"—she leans in—"always. Your mother is always right."

I can't help but to discern some hidden meaning from this. Her words are always laced with some sort of shade.

"I just want everything to be right tonight," Jason says, nervously.

"You always do," I say, returning my hand to his shoulder.

He smiles.

Meanwhile, Mama sips quietly on her lemon water, likely confused by the fuss being made over her, entirely unphased by the three of us.

Later, after we receive the bill and Jason pays, Vicki jumps out of her seat. "Well, this was really nice," she blurts. By now, she's finished an entire bottle. Probably more. Oddly, Jason hadn't seemed to notice. He was too busy drinking himself.

"Wait mom," he says. "Where you going? I have something I want to say first. Sit." He's once again beaming like he was in the car, to the point where his hands are visibly shaking. "Sit down."

Vicki reluctantly sits, plopping down hard on the cushioned chair.

"You ok Vicki?" Mama asks, appearing confused as she always does by Vicki's actions. "You've been acting strange all night."

"Yes! I'm fine."

But she clearly isn't. Throughout the dinner she repeatedly drew the attention of the surrounding tables, talking loudly, making unreasonable demands

of the waiter. She's currently drunk in a way that I've never seen her, in front of a room full of people who obviously recognize her from the news (I even spotted one girl recording her with her phone, but didn't care enough to speak up). And of course Vicki's never shied away from a bottle of wine, but she's also never willingly compromised her public image over it either. Vicki looks intently at Jason, then at me, and back again.

As soon as I feel her eyes on me again, Jason scoots his seat around to the left to face me, reaching his jittery right hand down into his pocket. My stomach drops like a brick as all of tonight's events come barreling into focus. "What are you doing Jas'?"

For the first time tonight, mama becomes fully engaged. She sits upright in her seat and grips my arm tight with anticipation. "Oh my god," she whispers.

"What I've been wanting to do since I first laid eyes on you in that coffeeshop." His voice is cracking and I suddenly can't help but to think I saw this coming all along. He pulls out a little black box and twirls it around nervously in his hand.

"Really?" That's all I can think to say right now. Last week you hated my guts Jason. Now you're proposing? Last week I was ready to move back in with mama for good and now you want me to spend the rest of your life with you.

"You remember that day?"

I do, I immediately think. “It was just before close and you came in all upset about some idiot that hurt your feelings. I gave you that chai latte on the house and sat with you for an hour.” I almost begin to cry at the thought of this. At the thought that all of my time with him has led up to this moment. The fact that we’ve been together for almost three years now and I’m still in the same exact position that I was then. I had been saving up money to go to college at the time. Then Jason came along and fully absorbed me into his life. It started out good, us going to concerts and art shows—things we both enjoyed, Eventually, though, it was all about his friends, his aspirations, his needs. There was no room left for mine. And time kept slipping away from me. I was just twenty-one when we first met. And look how the time has gone.

Mama leans into me, eyes wide, pressing her hand into my shoulder. I don’t look at her, but I know she’s smiling.

“And you listened and listened patiently,” he says. “And that’s what I fell in love with. Your patience and nurturing spirit.”

And what else, I want to ask. Why else do you want to be with me? But as I look around me, I see multiple heads turned towards us. People standing by their tables, smiling in awe. A couple of waiters holding trays full of steak and asparagus. Mashed potatoes with gravy spilling over the sides. And finally, I catch Vicki’s eyes staring back at me, just long enough to recognize a mutual feeling of unease.

“Will you marry me?” He asks, finally.

I look at him and see the yearning in his brown eyes. He loves me, and I *do* love him, though I wish I didn’t sometimes. I love him more than any guy I’ve ever known. And only God knows why. “Of course,” I almost whisper. “Yeah,” I say louder. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

It isn’t long before the wine starts to catch up with Jason, too. After the proposal, the restaurant gives us another bottle of wine on the house, and he and Vicki drink down most of it alone. I’ve barely had anything to drink all night. I couldn’t. I can’t. All of my thoughts and emotions come spilling out of me when I’m drunk, and I can’t afford to have that happen right now, especially in front of all of these people who just witnessed a happy proposal. And besides, I prefer to watch him have fun anyway. Jason becomes his most relaxed after a few drinks—unlike his usual neurotic self. I get enough out of just watching him this way. And, of course, someone has to be sober enough to drive home.

After we leave, I drop mama off at home, then me and Jason head downtown to his two-bedroom loft. It’s a newly renovated unit on the top floor of a complex that has a perfect view of the arch. I’ve been living with Jason for almost two years now, and even after all of this time, the place still doesn’t feel like my own. I’ve never had a place of my own.

We slowly walk up the steps to his apartment, me supporting his weight as he lightly stumbles along. His grip on me is tight, as if at any moment I might float away if he isn't careful. When I finally open the front door, Jason swings around to kiss me, standing on his tip toes.

He leads me to the bed, and despite my discomfort and anxiety, I immediately take charge, pushing him down on the bed, and unbuttoning my shirt. But just as I get to my pants, he gets up and grabs my hands.

"Wait. I want to talk about the wedding," he says.

"Already?" I laugh, awkwardly. "We got time to think about this. Let's just—"

"What do you think about October? The fall?" He interrupts. "Right around your birthday. Plus it's the perfect time of the year, and I know someone who can hook us up with a venue for a discount."

I give in and sit down on the bed, while he remains standing. "That's only six months away. Don't you think we need a little more time?"

"Six months is long enough. I mean...I don't think we should wait that long. It'll probably be pretty small anyway. Just close family and stuff. How's that sound, Keith?"

"It all sounds nice, it does..."

"But?"

“I just—you know I’ve been wanting to find another job, research different schools to apply to so I can finally get my degree. Some may be out of town—or not, I don’t know. I’m just saying, basically, that it just wouldn’t make sense to get married right before that, is all I’m trying to say. It wouldn’t be the best time.”

“And you can still do all of that. What’s the problem? Just apply to SLU or Wash U. You made good enough grades in high school, right?” He pushes me back against the bed before I can even respond, unbuttoning my pants, sliding them down my thighs.

I can’t tell him that I’ve already applied to Wash U, and that I’ve already been rejected. I can’t tell him about Northwestern, or what I’m really thinking. So I leave the conversation hanging up in the air, to be picked up at some later time, or to be left there forever, losing myself into him, into the moment, into us. Most of the lights are off, so our hands move swiftly in the dark, landing—eventually—in the right places. I help him undress me, slowly at first, then faster, kicking my pants off onto the floor, grabbing him, and undressing him the same way.

I smell the cologne on his skin. I feel the way his body quivers when I sink deeper into him, the firmness of his grip. I focus my attention on the light fixture hanging from the ceiling. The bulbs are held in a series of transparent, glass spheres that are attached to metal arms extending in all directions. And in this moment, I remember that despite all of the nice things that he owns, he somehow still needs me in his life. I’m once again thankful that he found me that night in the coffee shop, that he pulled me and found a place for me in his life.

Right now, it's just me and him, nothing and nobody else. The outside world and our respective places within it don't matter.

It's just after one o'clock the next day when I go to pick mama up from therapy. When I get there, I park in the lot right in front of the outpatient center, and wait. Wait for some sign of progress, for some sort of life to return to her. It's her fifth week in the program, and I haven't seen much of a change in her yet. I drive her here every morning before I go to work and take her home on my lunchbreak. She goes through the routine, humoring me with brief summaries of her group therapy sessions, talking about what she's learned, the new medicines that she's on. But I can see through the façade. She's been on family medical leave from her nursing job for weeks, and I don't know how much longer she'll even have that job if she doesn't get better soon. Jason has even asked her to come stay with us for a while, but she keeps refusing, and understandably so. Everyone wants their independence.

Minutes pass. I unlock my phone and scroll through my Facebook feed. It isn't long before I find it. A video of Vicki from last night shouting at that waiter has gone viral. This definitely will land a substantial blow to her ego. She already feels that she's aging out of the network, garnering less attention than the younger, fresher anchorwoman at the station. Or so I've heard. Which is why I feel she's been getting more and more involved in things that don't concern her lately, like my relationships with both Jason and mama (she occasionally

manages to convince mama to go to the spa with her). She must maintain some sense of control and influence at all times.

When mama finally gets in the car, she doesn't say anything to me but 'hey.' The drive to her house is usually fifteen minutes, but there's an accident on I-270 slowing us up. So as we sit at a standstill, I try to break the silence. "What did y'all talk about today?"

"The normal stuff," she says. "Goal setting, coping skills, thinking errors. Like we normally do."

"You open up about dad yet?"

"A little."

"What's a little? Did—"

"A little," she sharply repeats. "Mostly the good things about your father. The cologne he used to wear. Small things like that." She sighs, hoping this will be enough to satisfy me for the rest of the drive.

"But you need to talk about him—" I start, before trailing off after catching the hard look in her eye telling me to stop pressing the subject.

"I have to do this on my own time Keith."

"I know," I say. "Take your time."

In about fifteen minutes, the traffic clears up and I'm now able to drive more than five feet at a time before stopping again. I don't get much else out of

her for the remainder of the drive. We do briefly talk about last night, though, and the proposal. She mentions, in her calm, quiet voice, how happy she is for me to be getting married. I don't have much to say on this particular subject, so I'm relieved when she quickly becomes quiet again. By the time I pull up in front of her house, I've already run past my lunch hour. The afternoon mail will just have to wait, I guess.

Mama motions for the car door. "See you tonight," she says. "You are sleeping over tonight, right?"

"Yeah. I'll be back after work," I say. I usually only sleep over at mama's house a couple times a week, but lately it's been every other night.

She gets out of the car and closes the door shut.

I roll down the window. "You know what happened isn't your fault, right?" I say. "There was nothing you could do about it."

She leans over into the window, and smirks, but only briefly. "Jason's lucky he got you," she says to me before walking away.

The next day, the first thing that Jason tells me is, "Maybe Violet can move in with us after the wedding. I plan on moving to a bigger place by then anyway."

"I?"

“We. I meant after we plan to move to a bigger place,” Jason says. The guilt immediately registers onto his face. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget that I’m not alone anymore. Especially after being alone for so long.” He’s just finished putting the dishes in the dishwasher, and walks over and sits next to me on the couch. He reaches across my lap and grabs my left hand to marvel at the engagement ring on my finger.

“It’s cool. I get it,” I say. That’s as much reassurance I can offer him right now. I just want to go to sleep. “Is this your way of apologizing for last week?”

Jason drops my ring finger. “All of what?”

“Nothing, Never mind.”

“I just thought that moving your mom in would make the most sense right now.”

“The most sense for who though, Jason? You or her?”

“Her, of course. What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, mama don’t want to leave her house.”

“Have you even asked her about it?”

“No.” Because it’s stupid, I want to say. “Just give it some time Jason. It’s only been a few weeks.”

“Yeah, you’re right. My bad.” He moves in closer to me. “You know how carried away I get sometimes. I probably should go back to therapy myself. I

can't believe you're so much younger than me and are so much better at all of this." Jason lies down on my lap now. His body's hot and heavy, pinning my legs down to the couch like an anchor. "And by the way," he adds, "I've had the engagement rings for a few months now. It wasn't just another rash decision."

I resist the urge to push him off of me and onto the floor; instead, I close my eyes tight until I fall asleep and the night slips away.

On Saturday, I get a call from Vicki just as I'm headed to mama's house to watch a movie with her. Vicki wants to meet with me later to talk. "About what," I say to her. But she doesn't give me an answer.

"Just be at my house by six," she says. "You know I can't bear to show my face in public after what happened to me on Sunday."

I intentionally get to her condo at six-thirty, and when I pull up I can already see her skinny face peeping through the window. Jason is out drinking with some work friends and doesn't know I'm here.

"Do you want to marry my son or not?" She says to me, as soon as I get settled onto her expensive sofa. It's made of some sort of thick leather that immediately makes my legs moist. She pours me a glass of wine as she waits for my answer. "Keith? Did you hear what I said?"

"Why are you asking me this?" Once she's done pouring, I just stare at the glass of wine as if it's poison.

“Well suit yourself,” she says, as if reading my mind about the wine. “Now answer my question?” She lowers herself onto the couch across from me, taking slow sips from her wineglass, basking in the taste, as if experiencing it for the first time.

“Of course, I want to marry him,” I say, standing up again. “That’s all you called me over here for?”

“Sit down,” she says.

And I do, reluctantly.

“You and I have never really seen eye to eye,” she continues. “I always thought you were too young for my son, potentially fickle. That you’d change your mind about him and break his heart. You know how sensitive he is. I couldn’t handle him doing something *drastic*. Plus I didn’t want someone just living off of him and using him. And when Jason told me that he was going to propose at dinner on Sunday, I was understandably anxious. But not because I was opposed to the idea necessarily. You *have* grown on me these last couple of years. I like your mother more, though, but you’re not completely bad. I see what you do for him. How you take care of him. How happy you make him.”

“Mmhm. Then why did you get drunk as hell and embarrass yourself that night?”

“I—she laughs, rolling her eyes at me—didn’t know what you would say. I didn’t know if you would say yes.”

“But I *did*. I did said yes.”

“That was the word that came out of your mouth, but not what I saw in your eyes. You were practically mortified, for god sakes!”

“No,” I blurt. “I was just nervous and caught off guard like anybody else would be. What you’re not gonna do is sit up here and tell me I don’t love Jason. Because—”

“Calm down. That’s not at all what I’m saying. Don’t twist my words. But there’s definitely something going on. What is it? Are you bored? Are you getting tired of him? Is he whining too much? Is there someone else?”

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“I said it’s nothing.”

“Just cut the shit, Keith.” Vicki hops up and quickly paces in my direction. Startled, I prepare to move away from her, until I realize that she’s only headed to the kitchen to grab another bottle of wine. “Be real with me. I’m sure that this is the frankest conversation you’ll have all month. With Jason, you can never say how you truly feel outright. You have to ease into it.” She fumbles with something in the kitchen sink before walking back to the couch. “You do know,” she says, “that Jason’s father abandoned us when he was just a baby, right?”

“How could I forget? You never let me forget.” I take in a long, deep breath. Not this again.

“Well, then, you would know that being a White, single mother of a biracial child, one who just so happened to like playing dress up in my heels, was not easy. In fact, it was extremely hard.” Vicki digs a small, chrome-colored corkscrew into the bottle’s cork and begins to twist. “I didn’t know what I was doing. If I was raising him right. If he would be bullied for liking girl things, or the way that he looked. All I knew was that I had to push him to do his very best to succeed and to protect him from whatever and *whomever* tried to hurt him. And up until now I have done just that.”

“And I understand all of that stuff Vicki...” I trail off, not wanting to say anything else. I look at her thin, pale hands, and the way she’s struggling, but still determined to pop the cork. She never stops until she gets what she wants. “Do you need help with that?”

“No. I got it. Just tell me the truth.”

“I got into Northwestern. That’s it. That’s the big secret. You happy now?” I let the words fall out of my mouth and immediately want to pick them back up and swallow them.

“Northwestern?!” She pops the cork, almost hitting herself in the face with her own hand. “Excuse me? Northwestern what? University? You applied? And they let you in?” She begins to laugh, pouring herself another glass.

“Yes! They let me in,” I shoot up out of my seat. “And they only accept nine percent of applicants and they chose *me*. And, no, Jason doesn’t know. And

I haven't decided...you know what? I'm not even going. Now *there*. I couldn't leave my mama alone right now anyway."

Vicki doesn't say anything else for a while. She just sips her glass of wine and stares at me intently, as if analyzing my face for more hidden clues. I look anywhere but at her. A knot is slowly growing at the pit of my stomach, threatening to rise up to my throat at any moment and choke me. There's no way of keeping that letter buried in that closet now. Not with anchorwoman Vicki on the story. Everyone will know by the end of the hour.

"You have to tell him," she says to me as I get up and head for the door. "Or I will."

After I leave Vicki's, I drive around the city for a while, with no clear goal in mind. All I know is that I need to stay away from Jason and that apartment. I eventually—inevitably—wind up at a bar in The Grove, where I proceed to have too many Kentucky Mules.

Afterwards, I drive to mama's house very tipsy. It's almost midnight now, so I know she's probably not awake. It doesn't even matter. I just don't have it in me to lay down next to Jason tonight. I somehow manage to make it to mama's without incident. I park out front and wobble my way to the front door quickly before anyone sees me. I use my key to carefully unlock the door and open it

slowly, so as to not make too much noise. But it's a pointless act, because I hear her footsteps in the kitchen.

"Keith, is that you?" She yells.

"Yeah, ma'. What you doing up this late?" I walk towards the kitchen, trying my best to appear sober.

"I'm grown, that's why. Now what are you doing here? I thought you were going out with Jason?"

I finally make it to the kitchen and see her at the counter meticulously spreading grape jelly onto a burnt slice of toast. "When did I say I was going out with him tonight?"

"You didn't. I just assumed you would be out with your fiancé." She turns around with the toast in her hand and takes a bite. Immediately, I can see that she knows.

"I'm not drunk," I say.

"Yes you are. I don't know why you bother lying to me when you know you ain't good at it. Ain't never been. Where you been at?" She takes a seat at the big kitchen table. It's round and made of glass, and cluttered with god knows how many weeks of unopened mail.

"The Grove."

"Ah. And what were you doing there?"

“Having a couple of drinks.”

“Seems like more than a couple. You went alone?”

“Yeah. Jason was still out with his work friends, so I decided to just go out by myself.”

“Ok.” She returns to her toast, taking slow, deliberate bites. “You staying the night?”

“Yeah.” I grab a cup from the cabinet and fill it with water from the faucet. There’s no space for me to sit since the other chairs have piles of junk sitting on top of them. I stand by the sink, facing the back of her seat.

She looks over her shoulder at me, a signal for me to either find a seat somewhere or to just move the hell from behind her.

I clear off the stack of magazines, bills, and newspapers on the chair next to her and sit down.

“You gonna just watch me eat toast?” She says, chewing. “Or is something else on your mind?”

“How did you know you wanted to marry my father?”

“Hmm. Alright. I guess something is on your mind.” She takes another bite. “I don’t know Keith. I think I really didn’t know until I said my vows. He was always sure though.”

“That late, huh?”

“Yep. And then after that it was mostly smooth sailing. It was real good for us for years, until he found out about the early Alzheimer’s, but I...” She trails off for a second, stopping herself from going any further. “So I guess you having second thoughts about marrying Jason?” She finishes her toast and wipes the crumbs from her hands with a paper towel. “I had doubts too at first. I was just twenty when he proposed. I wasn’t thinking about marriage or kids. I just wanted to go to school and become a RN.”

Mama is talking more than usual tonight, so I sit quietly, trying not to interrupt, hoping that she continues to talk and doesn’t realize what she’s saying.

“You just have to figure out if it’s just nerves,” she’s currently saying, “or if it’s something serious. There was a time when me and him were having our issues. This was right before he got sick...but that’s in the past now. I guess what I’m saying is, you have to figure out if it’s a deal breaker for you. So which one is it? Do you even know yet?”

“I’m afraid to say it, but I think it’s serious. The truth is...I’ve been lying to him and to you,” I begin to ramble. “I applied to a couple of universities back in December without none of y’all knowing, and just found out I got into one of them—Northwestern—and of course it’s out of state. I only have a week left to decide what I’m gonna do and I don’t know yet.”

“About damn time!” She yells, catching me off-guard. She shoots up out of her seat, almost knocking the jelly-stained ceramic plate off the table. It rattles on

the table for a moment before settling back into place. "Why didn't you tell me about this? That you were trying to go? I'm so proud of you." She leans over and hugs me. "I thought you'd given up on it."

"So you're not mad? I mean, if somebody did this to me I would be upset. But anyway, even if I went I would be all the way in Chicago, away from you."

"Oh Keith, I'll be fine. I'm the mama, remember?"

Although it's nice to hear her say this, I'm not sure I believe her. She still blames herself for my father's death, for him taking his own life. She was there when it happened. It was Halloween night and he'd gone to bed early, saying that he was so tired from working all day. Mama stayed outside on the porch giving candy to trick or treaters. The bedroom was dark when she entered and she didn't bother to turn on the light. She lied down next to him thinking he was simply asleep the whole time, not realizing that he'd taken almost a whole bottle of aspirin and was already gone. That happened four years ago now. She was coping well with it at first (at least as well as can be expected under the circumstances), but it seemed like it finally hit her all at once this past year and a half, as if she had been running away from it all of this time and it somehow finally caught up with her. I guess she got tired. But there was nothing that either of us could do about it. He's gone.

"If he really loves you," mama says before I go to bed. "He'll understand the decision that you have to make, and that you may not want to marry him yet."

I cling onto these words when I climb into my old childhood bed, hoping that she's right and that everything won't come crashing down onto me in the morning when I tell him the truth.

When I get to Jason's apartment early the next morning, he is already awake, eating some runny eggs and oatmeal. He's standing up, at the kitchen counter, shoveling the food down his throat. I walk up to him and kiss him on the cheek. He pulls away from me.

"How's your mom doing?" He says between bites. He doesn't smile, nor does he turn around to look at me. He starts scraping his spoon against the bowl loudly, as if determined to scrape every last oat from the bowl.

"She's doing fine, but we need to talk when you finish eating. I have something I need to tell you."

"I already know," he says, turning around to look at me. "You're leaving me and going to Chicago."

"So she told you about Northwestern?" A wave of heat flashes through me. "She was supposed to give me a chance to tell you. That evil bitch." The word slips from my mouth, but I don't even care. It's the truth. I see Jason getting more and more upset now and I know what's about to happen. "I should've known she would tell you first. She was probably happy to have something to use against me."

He pushes his dishes into the sink, the bowl and plate crashing hard against the metal. "Fuck you. Don't blame this on her. You had months to tell me, but you didn't."

He's starting to cry now, big, ugly tears that fall quickly down his face. But this time I don't try to console him. I'm tired of it. All of it. "Oh, here you go with the damn crying shit," I say. "And this is exactly why I didn't tell you, because you would've fell apart and cried like a damn baby, automatically thinking I was breaking up with you and leaving you behind all alone."

"But you are! I thought we wanted the same things, but I guess I was wrong this whole time. Do you even still want to get married? Do you even want to be with me anymore?"

"No. I don't. At least not right now. I think we need some time apart."

Jason doesn't say a word to me. He just grabs his car keys from the counter and starts pacing towards the door. He quickly slips on the shoes sitting there.

"Where are you going? You're going to leave wearing pajamas? Are you out of your mind?"

He doesn't answer. He quickly swings the door open and slams it shut.

I call his cell phone all day, and send him dozens of text messages, but he doesn't respond. Antsy, I leave to go to mama's for a while, then come back to

the apartment only to find that he still isn't there. So eventually the anger subsides and I start to panic. Around eight o'clock that night, just as I'm getting seriously worried that he might've done something drastic, I hear him walking through the door from the other room. When I go out there to see him, he's crumpled over by the door. His eyes are closed, and all I hear is a series of groans. "What did you do?" I say.

Jason groans again, just before he leans forward and vomits all over his shoes. "Oh no," he moans. He starts to cry, looking up at me as if noticing my presence for the first time. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He tries to get up now, but stumbles, slipping on his vomit.

I catch him before he falls over. "Let me just get you to the bathroom," I say. "It's ok. Just relax."

I walk him to the toilet, where he continues his vomiting. "I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"No. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He vomits again.

"I know," I say, patting his shoulder. "I'm going to make sure you're alright." Once again, I feel myself being sucked into the same routine.

"Are you breaking up with me?" He says. A string of spit hangs from his mouth into the toilet. He can barely keep his eyes open.

I don't answer his question.

And he doesn't repeat it, either forgetting about it or simply unable to speak.

That night, after I get him cleaned up and he finally falls asleep, I lie next to him wide awake. I'm patting down his curly, brown hair, listening to him breathe, wondering if he's ok. If he'll ever be okay. If I will ever be okay. But then I close my eyes and try to forget about today, this whole week, and imagine all of those nights we laid in bed next to each other just like this, when were completely alone and at peace. We used to talk for hours about nothing at all. Just us in this loft. I try hard not to think about whatever is going to happen tomorrow, when we both wake up with clear minds, when we remember the hurt. I try not to imagine what will happen next week when I have to give them an answer, or next year, if we'll even be speaking to each other then. Just for tonight, with the light from the moon shining on us, I remember the cute man I met that night in the coffee shop, the man I fell in love with, and everything, in this moment, is as it should be again.

Hereditary

Just yesterday, before you left the safety of your home in Chicago, you wrote down all of the possible outcomes for this meeting, but only came up with two: physical assault or forgiveness. Your mind is too split for anything in the middle. On one hand, there's you—the strong and sensible one; on the other hand, there's another girl you call *The Other*. The Other is strange and unpredictable; anxiety-ridden and depressed; volatile and unstable. She's been there at the back of your mind ever since you were nine-years-old, when the state took your mama away from you. The Other came from mama, and now it's in you.

When you walk into the cafeteria, you see your mama sitting at the middle, round table, thumbing through the pages of a big, brown book. It's thick and weighty, like an encyclopedia. But the mama you used to know was never much of a reader. She turns the pages quickly, her head moving up and down, skimming and skimming through. You close in on her, walk past clusters of patients and visitors, but she's so absorbed in this task of hers that she doesn't see you. The two male technicians slouched in the corner behind you tell you to keep going, because you've suddenly stopped. Conversations pause. Heads turn; but you don't dare look at the people staring back at you. You need no further confirmation of how crazy you look. You're jumpy, though you try your best to remain calm. And you're sweating in the dead of winter. If you weren't

currently wearing a visitor's badge, the patients might mistake you for one of them.

And now, mama breaks away from her reading and looks up. She notices you—your stomach—and slowly closes her book. She gets up right away and you imagine her arms outstretched, waiting to receive you. But instead, they rest limply at her sides. You pace towards her with renewed determination, only to stop yet again when you reach the table. Both of you stand there a moment, not knowing what to do, until reluctantly, you sit.

"You actually showed up," she says to you, as the surrounding chatter resumes. There are moles on her face that weren't there before, locks of graying hair sprouting at her edges. Underneath a mound of curly hair are half-opened eyes and a smile both crooked and toothy. But her nose. Her nice and symmetrical, button nose remains the same as yours. It's the one inherited feature you actually love. Mama reaches for a big cup of something steamy and sips from it slowly. "It's hot apple cider," she says. "Their treat to us—I guess—for the holidays."

You look at her firmly, then away, then back again. You avoid tearing up now, blinking rapidly as if something is caught in your eye. You vividly remember the day mama tried to kill Mikey. Grandma Maddie's eyes were pinkish red like the barrettes in your hair when she ran and plucked you out of P.E. class as if someone was after you. And the car ride back to Maddie's house seemed to go

on for hours. All of these details come to you in flashes now. Maddie paced the living room in her old, teal house shoes. She spoke in riddles and vague utterances. *She went and did it, oh God*, you'd hear her say. *Your daddy's still at work*, she'd tell you when you asked what was wrong, as if that was somehow an answer. This went on all night, until two days later when daddy came and he and Maddie sat you down and told you that your baby brother was in the hospital, and that mama was gone, but not *dead* gone, just gone. She had done a bad thing and had to get help. It was only later that you found out the how: that mama took baby Mikey into the garage, sat both herself and Mikey into the front seats of the car, and turned on the ignition. Daddy found them just in time. Thank God.

"You look the same," mama says to you now. "I mean, obviously you're older, but not much has changed." The last time you've spoken to her alone was that last morning when she made you breakfast before school. You can still hear the bacon sizzle and pop in the grease, see the butter run down the sides of your pancakes (crispy on the ends like you liked them). You should've known then that something was wrong. She hadn't cooked for months. Mama was very quiet, unusually so. All she'd said to you during breakfast was *I love you*. Nothing else. Not that she was leaving you and daddy behind and taking Mikey with her.

"A lot has changed, actually," you blurt. "As you can see." A lot, especially now that you're five months pregnant. Ever since you found out, you've been slowly losing trust in all or most things, especially yourself. You fear that your mind is betraying you, that you're slowly becoming someone else entirely. You

barely leave the house now. You're wary of the thoughts that might intrude when you're out on the street. You avoid the steps, because you may fall or slip. You only came here to Saint Louis, because you were compelled to by the baby growing inside of you. But you rode the Amtrak, because five hours behind the wheel of a car was just not possible.

Everything is a threat to your unborn child, especially The Other. She spreads doubt when certainty should be automatic. *Why is he looking at you like that?* She'd ask about your boyfriend, Terrance. *He might be trying to hurt you.* And this is precisely what happened a few weeks ago when he wrapped his arms tightly around you and you panicked and fought and threatened to call the police. And now, he's no longer speaking to you.

You used to fear death the most out of everything there is to fear. The thought of your body betraying you seemed foreign and impossible at the age of nineteen. But now, the fear of your mind abandoning you, leaving you behind to do as it pleases, is terrifying. Pregnancy is the last thing you've ever wanted, but here you are, and there's no escape. The only option is a healthy birth—a breathing, functioning child. You will not be her.

"How far along?" mama asks. She's currently whirling a plastic straw around in her cup. Her hand moves consistently in a clock-wise motion. You can't help but to look. She seems oddly sedate, and you wonder if it's just the meds or a newly acquired state of being. Nothing about any of this seems to phase her much.

“Six months.”

“Boy or girl?”

“A girl.” You’re naming her Madeleine, after your father’s mother.

“A granddaughter,” she says musingly. Her voice is soft, and lighter than you remember. “I know your daddy’s happy.” She offers a wistful smile. “I’m surprised he even let you come see me.”

The Other wants to jump up and shake mama, to tell her that this isn’t something to celebrate; that it’s not a dream, but a nightmare.

“Well, first of all,” you bark before catching yourself, “I’m *grown*. And second, he doesn’t even know I’m here. And—”

“Oh,” she says, cutting you off. She looks down at her cup of cider. It’s starting to cool off now. “Well, anyway,” she smiles, “how’s *he* doing? Is *he* ok?”

“If you mean Mikey, then yeah, he’s good,” you say, meaning that Mikey doesn’t know or remember anything about mama. “He’s a perfectly normal eleven year old.”

For the first time, mama seems to emote. Tears well up in her eyes, not at the sight of you, no, but at the thought of Mikey. “Do you have a picture? I just want to see what he looks like—who he looks like now.”

“No, I don’t. But he looks nothing like you. I can tell you that. He’s lucky that way, I guess.”

"Well, anyway," she says, blinking the tears away, "are you married?"

You lightly scoff, pissed that she doesn't react to your dig. "I will be soon," you lie. But you don't know why you do. Terrance, the baby's father, no longer wants anything to do with you. Says you're paranoid and completely insufferable. Or something like that. "Look," you say, growing impatient, "I came here to ask—"

"That's exciting, Tisha," she interjects. "Really. You seem to be doing good for yourself." Mama looks up into space as if noticing something on the ceiling. Her eyes stay there a moment until she finds what she's looking for. "Hey," she goes, looking down at you, "you remember how I used to take you down to Arkansas to see your Aunt Shirley, Byron, and them?"

You nod. "Yeah, but—"

"And how we all used to go camping in her backyard. You know she had all of those acres...Oh! And we'd start a fire and you and your cousin Byron would go grab big sticks and rocks and pretend to be cavemen."

You stare at her as she gets lost in this reverie. It's amazing how easily excitement fills her voice. She recounts these Arkansas trips as if those were idyllic times, entirely free of pain. "I do remember all that stuff," you say, "but I also remember you and Aunt Shirley fighting all the time and screaming when y'all thought were sleep. I didn't know then what was happening, but I get it now."

Mama looks down at her cup and sighs.

“You stopped taking your meds. You stopped getting treatment. No wonder it all happened.”

“That was all a long time ago, Tisha. It’s in the past. I want to tell you about my new job.” Now she really perks up, sitting up straight in her chair. “It’s in dietary.” Mama starts to ramble now, not letting you get a word in. She talks about all the progress she’s made recently, how she’s in the client work program, how it took her awhile to find her place here. The conversation soon becomes so ordinary and plain that you wonder if she’s in fact talking to a stranger. But most alarming of all is her calmness, the ease with which words slip past her lips. “Have you been downtown near the arch lately? I heard it changed a lot,” she’s saying now. But you barely listen. She holds the big cup of cider in her hand, drinks from it occasionally, but mostly just stirs it with her straw. She speaks with lots of umms and aahs, jumping from one superficial topic to the next, circling her mind for words to say, like the straw inside of her cup. At any moment, you think that the hot, brown liquid might slosh over the sides and onto the table, then drip onto the tiled floor for everyone there to see. Staff will come running with napkins—*no*, mops—while you sit and watch helplessly. As much as they try to wipe at it, the brown tint from the cider just won’t go away. It stains the floor with just the faintest hint of its presence. *What a mess you’ve made, mama*, you’ll say to her. *What a stupid, horrible, hot mess!*

“Stop doing that,” you say, almost smacking the table.

“Doing what?”

“Swishing that cider. You making me nervous.” But immediately you realize how crazy you must sound and almost bite your tongue to stop more silly words from falling out. You turn your head around towards the staff, only to find them staring back at you. Your palms are sweaty now and you wipe them on your gray sweatpants. “I feel like I might be losing my mind too.”

“You’re not,” she says to you.

“I *am*. And it’s because of you.”

The muscles in mama’s neck clench. She glances at the other tables one by one. No one is looking at you two, but she scans the room anyway, as if searching for perked ears. “I stupidly thought you came here because you just wanted to see me.” Her hands begin to shake and she stops stirring the cider. “This is my first time seeing you...and on the phone I almost thought that you might’ve missed me.”

Because you do miss her. “I don’t miss you. How could I miss someone I ain’t seen for over half my life? I only came here for answers. So no more talking about your new life and how you’ve moved on from us, your family.”

“So what is it? What do you want from me? Sorry? I can’t change what happened—”

"I need to ask you something, and I've been waiting almost ten years to say it. No, wait"—you place a hand up at her—"Please don't cut me off. When you were pregnant with Mikey," you whisper now, "how did *it* start?"

"It?" She asks, looking at you.

"You *know* what I mean. When did you start feeling *different*?" Crazy is the word you really want to use, but, considering your environment, it wouldn't be wise.

The way mama looks at you now—full of pity—makes you hot. It's as if you're a child again, running into her and daddy's bedroom in tears, because you had a bad dream about the man without a face sitting in the tree near your window staring at you. She'd get out of bed and talk to you in that baby voice and tell you *everything will be alright*, that it was *only just a nightmare*, and *eventually the nightmares will stop coming*. But the nightmares *did* in fact keep coming. Instead of a faceless man, it was mama watching you drown, choke, or fall off a cliff over and over again.

"Okay," she says, slapping the table, shaking the cup. Cider spills over the rim. Her yellow, light-skinned face is flushed red. "I get it. I owe you an explanation. But Tisha I assure you—"

"When did you start hearing the voices?"

You remember when mama first told you that she was pregnant with a boy. It was summer, and mama and daddy had family and friends over for a baby shower. When you saw mama enter the backyard with a bunch of baby blue balloons, you remember how Maddie and the rest of the family started cheering, and you immediately knew. *You're gonna have a little brother soon*, mama said. Daddy brought out the cupcakes then, and you were the first to grab one, licking off the blue icing before taking a bite.

When the baby coming? When the baby coming?, you'd say every other week when she first got pregnant. You bombarded mama with belly rubs and hugs. In those early months, she would tell you that the baby was coming soon and your father would just laugh at your enthusiasm and give your little pigtails a tug, before telling you to settle down. As her belly grew bigger, you'd rest your head there and feel the light pitter-patter of your little brother's kicks.

Seemingly out of nowhere, a joyous energy possessed the house again. It's crazy, you think, the way time and age brings you a new perspective. Old images of events no longer look as benign as they did before. The nuances come to the surface. Before the pregnancy, there was a somberness that only became apparent when it was no longer there, and even more so now, as you've put all the pieces together. There were times throughout your childhood when mama went away—a week here, a few days there. You didn't know why at the time. You didn't know that she was in the hospital getting treatment for her acute psychotic and manic symptoms.

As the months passed, you noticed mama smiling less, worrying more, and becoming more distant. By the third trimester, mama grew frustrated with your enthusiasm, snapping at you, telling you to move away whenever you'd come rushing towards her with too much force. "Don't touch me, Ti Ti," she'd say. "I don't want you to hurt him." Jolted, your eyes would immediately well up, and tears would flood in, despite your best efforts to stay calm. Through the watery film of tears, you'd see the blurry image of her anxiously feeling her belly and checking for any signs of movement or pain. Once in your room, you cried until daddy came to you, and you told him you wanted nothing more than for your brother to come out of her, so that this would *all be over!*, as if that was all there was to it.

But it wasn't. And this was the mistake you and your father never truly got over—not knowing what was coming next.

"Come I come in mama?" You asked one morning, two weeks before the incident occurred. You stood just outside of her bedroom, your head poked through the crack of the door.

"No. No. Go to your room and play." She was in bed, buried underneath the covers. "And where's your daddy at? Tell him to come here."

"But mama...."

"But mama what?"

“I want to lay down with you and Mikey and watch TV. Please mama.”

You’d been asking her this all morning, but the answer was always the same.

“Didn’t I tell you to go away and leave me the hell alone?! Go away, Tisha.

And don’t come back to my door. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

You ran to your room and didn’t come out until your daddy had to practically drag you out to eat dinner.

After that day, it seemed to you that you and daddy were all each other had. Daddy was always stressed, not knowing what to do anymore. Mama refused to see any doctors. She refused to see anyone who might help. *I’m not crazy*, she’d say. *I’m not crazy. I’m not crazy. I’m not crazy*. Over and over and over again until she tried to leave the world with your brother, and you didn’t see her anymore.

Mama looks up at the ceiling again, at the spot where all of her answers to you are apparently kept. “It started years before Mikey. In my early twenties, before you were born. I started having these symptoms...Hearing voices. Paranoia. I got so depressed that...”

“That what?”

“I was in and out of depression. Then there’d be moments when I’d have so much energy that no one could stop me. Your grandma just told me it was just

the up and downs of life. And that it just hit me a little harder than everybody else. They didn't really know anything about mental illness."

"You tried to kill yourself before, didn't you?"

"I don't want to talk about that, Tisha."

"Was it before or after I was born?"

"It was before. I wasn't even pregnant with you yet."

"And now the same thing is happening to me now. And I can't do shit about it." The volume in the room drops. You can almost feel the room shifting towards you.

"Hey," you hear one of the technicians say. "Keep it down over there."

Mama's eyes are closed as if she's imagining a different place. "Have you even been to a doctor?"

"No."

She opens her eyes. "Then how do you know you got what I got? That you have anything wrong with you?"

"I just know."

"You know or you just scared to go?"

"I'm not scared."

"So you came all the way to Saint Louis to speak to me about this instead of just going to a doctor right in Chicago?"

“Yeah, and?” You feel Madeleine kick you hard and you lean forward and touch your stomach.

“And I just think it’s weird. Why come see someone you clearly hate when you can go talk to a professional. Seems like nonsense to me.”

“Shit.” Madeleine keeps kicking you as if trying to break free from your womb.

“I’ve been doing okay these past couple of years and now this,” mama continues.

“You’re right. This was a mistake,” you say, rising out of your chair. “I’m getting the hell out of here.”

“Wait, Ti Ti. Sit down.”

You drop down in the seat, but you don’t look at her. Madeleine is still kicking.

“Now why did you really come here to see me?” She asks again.

Tears well up in your eyes. Your mouth opens, but words don’t immediately come out. “That day when I asked to come lay down with you and Mikey.” You wipe away at your eyes. “It was right before the incident. You kept telling me no. Go away. Don’t come back. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Of course you don’t. You told me that you didn’t want to see my face again. And then you did what you did with Mikey and I didn’t see you anymore.”

“Oh...Ti Ti.” Mama tries to grab your hand to console you but you snatch it away.

“Oh Ti Ti nothing! You left me. Why did you leave me?” You’re up now leaning over the table. “Why didn’t you want to stay for me?”

Mama’s eyes are wide and frozen, her mouth sealed tight.

The two staff members run over and tell you that you have to leave now, that you’re causing a scene.

“I’ll be a better mother than you ever were to me,” you say, but obviously don’t believe. You see her face as they escort you away. It’s tight with pain. When you finally exit the cafeteria, you hear her scream, and this scream does nothing for you. Her pain does not soothe your pain.

Madeleine is still kicking and hasn’t stopped. This is the longest she’s ever kicked. And there’s a deep ache in your stomach and back that hits you quick and hard. You run and run as fast as you can, as The Other comes panicking in your ear, telling you that little Madeleine will die if you don’t run and catch a cab, that she is coming, little Madeleine is coming soon.

The Boy I Used to Know

Early on a Saturday, before the sun was even fully awake, I heard Fred's voice in my sleep. It sounded distant and jumbled up, like he was drowning or something. But I knew what he wanted. When I woke up, I still heard him, so I eased myself off of the couch to follow the sound. Mama was on the other couch still asleep—she was always asleep when I was young. Her snoring was so drawn out that I wondered if she could even breathe right. I made it out of the apartment easy enough, reaching up high for the chain lock on the door, sliding it off after a few tries. I slowly closed the door behind me and pressed my ear hard up against it. Seconds passed before I heard mama's bear sounds again. Finally, I tip-toed down two flights of wooden steps until I reached the bottom where I found him. Fred was standing at the entrance, looking all goofy with a grin on his face. He had the look of a criminal.

"Last time I checked, you supposed to sleep-in on the weekend!" I said.

"I want to play," Fred said, still grinning.

Fred didn't talk very much. Most of the time, he just smiled and pointed, mumbling all kinds of things I stopped trying to understand a while before.

He pointed at the front door, which was propped open by a red brick. It was usually locked tight so that the kids in the building didn't get any ideas and try to sneak out, like me.

Outside, it was cool, but not cold. And it was just bright enough for the streetlights to turn off. We stood a moment in the grass, deciding what we wanted to play. Well, Fred was deciding. He was the one who'd invited me out there, so those were the rules. I checked the second floor window to see if the lights were still off and they were. Good. Still, I knew it wouldn't be long before mama woke.

I looked around—as I always did—at the little yard full of brown spots, and at what my mama said were dandelions. “Dandies” sounded better to me, but she told me I was wrong. I was always wrong about something. Fred sat down Indian-style on the grass with broken dandies sticking out underneath him. I pulled a fistful of the suckers up by the root and little balls of dirt fell from the bottoms onto my hands. The white fuzz on the tops stood no chance against the wind, which had already started to pick up out there. I carefully picked through the dandies trying to find the one that looked the best to put in my hair.

“This one's more cuter,” Fred said, walking towards me.

I hadn't even seen him get up.

“It's the longest,” he continued, pointing at it.

I smiled and agreed.

He pulled the flower from my hand and twisted it around a group of my fuzzy braids.

“How I look Fred?”

He said nothing.

“Wait here! I’ll be back Fred. I’m gonna go find a mirror.” I had a very clear idea of what it meant to be pretty back then, and it always meant putting a flower in your hair like Diana Ross in “Lady Sings the Blues”—my grandma’s favorite movie.

“Where were you little boy?” mama asked as I walked in.

I stopped dead in my tracks, turning to face her. I mumbled something indecipherable, but mama didn’t seem to care about what I was trying to say; instead, her eyes wandered to the door. “Shit. I must’ve left the door unlocked all night,” she whispered.

There was shuffling in the other room. Tasha was awake.

“Have you been out there—outside? You know better than to leave this house by yourself, BJ.” Her voice perked up with agitation. She walked up, locked the door, and snatched my arm, walking me to the pink-tiled bathroom down the hall. I sat silently on the toilet seat—the dandie still in my hair—as mama turned the knob of the bathtub. It wouldn’t budge. After a few more tries the warm water started gulping out. “Don’t take long in here,” she said. “We have to go.”

“Go where mama? For good?” I said, despite already understanding what was going on. We were moving again.

“We going to stay with your grandma. Can’t stay here no more,” she said matter-of-factly. I was sure mama could see the disappointment in my face, because she said, “it won’t be that bad.”

I didn’t believe her. Her and grandma never got along. It seemed like they spent more time arguing than they did awake. Mama tossed and turned so bad in her sleep I was sure she was fighting grandma in her dreams.

“And you better not start crying neither,” she went on. “And get that stupid flower out your hair. I just braided it and you put a dirty flower up in it.” She sighed. “You can’t wear stuff like that in public.”

But I did cry. I cried all throughout my bath—mainly over my new friend Fred. The five-year-old boy lived just across the hall of the apartment building. I didn’t mind being two years older than him. I was just happy to have someone to play with. There weren’t always children around for me to do so. For as long as I could remember, me and mama had been migrating, hopping from house to house, apartment to apartment, without a place to call our own. It wasn’t that mama had never tried to find her own apartment—she had. She had a few apartments, but had been evicted and lost assistance due to consistently violating the terms of her lease. Just before each departure, tears flowed from my eyes, but eventually they’d dry and I’d adjust to the new arrangements. I’d gotten used to Tasha and enjoyed her presence. Unlike mama, she watched cartoons and played games with me when she wasn’t busy.

Outside of the bathroom, I heard the gurgling sounds of coffee being made. Janet Jackson's "I Get Lonely" blared from the stereo. Mama, in her shrill, out of tune voice, started singing the chorus.

Impatient and fussy, Tasha sat at the kitchen table verbally calculating the amount of time she had left before her shift at the mall started. "Y'all need to hurry up. Y'all got fifteen minutes," she said.

Three months prior, Tasha allowed mama and me to stay with her, not really out of pity, I think now, but a naïve belief that she could change mama. She thought mama was simply lazy and unmotivated. Lost, perhaps. To Tasha, she became a project to take on—something to be sculpted and molded and started and finished. She thought if she took the time and applied enough pressure that a diamond would emerge. Still, Tasha made the terms clear: mama could stay with her until she got on her feet only if she was making an effort to do so.

Initially, Mama was following through. She found a job at a department store working part-time hours. Nevertheless, after a month, she was let go due to "inappropriate conduct" (i.e. she cursed at a customer). Tasha encouraged Mama to think about going back to school: "go into nursing like me," she had said. But Mama had no intent to return. Tasha poked, prodded, suggested, hinted, and outright told Mama to figure out her life, to strive for something more. Mama told Tasha that working fast food was "beneath her," so she opted out of it. She did, however, start doing hair for money, but by this point Tasha was

exhausted. After a few arguments over rent, Tasha finally told Mama that she had a week to find somewhere else to stay. And today was that day.

After a great deal of nagging, mama grudgingly agreed to let me say goodbye to Fred before they left. I met an angry Fred in the hallway between the two apartments. "You be good Fred," I said, as I gave him a big hug.

"Why is she taking you away from me," Fred said. He was a small brown boy with dark brown—almost black—eyes. Fred shot Mama a nasty look.

"I don't know why Fred." I turned to mama. "Fred don't like you mama," I said plainly, as if stating the time or day of the week.

Mama rolled her eyes. "I don't like his ass either." Mama didn't particularly care for Fred. Actually, it wasn't really Fred that she didn't like. It was how I would always blame Fred for everything: the candy and cigarettes that went missing from her purse, the broken lamp in the living room, and the occasional drink that was spilled.

"You done said your goodbyes," Mama said. "Now come on lil boy."

Although mama told me over and over again that Fred wasn't real, I ignored her. He was real to me, and that was all that mattered.

Tasha had driven us part of the way to grandma's, but dropped us off at Dr. Martin Luther King and Goodfellow. Any further would be going out of her way, she'd said, and she was done going above and beyond for Mama.

"You just being petty and ornery," mama had said.

"Just get out already," Tasha said. She gave me a tight, suffocating hug before she drove off. "Be good, B.J."

The crisp, cold, winter air hit my face in a harsher way than it had earlier. It was an hour and a half past dawn. The sky was a bland gray. I wore a puffy blue coat and carried a Micky Mouse backpack full of toys and clothes. Meanwhile, mama was bogged down by luggage and bags, huffing and puffing every few seconds from the burden.

To either side of us were abandoned buildings boarded up and crumbling, remnants of a different era. I hopped over glass from a broken bottle and observed all the trash and debris that littered the sidewalks. On the corner of Dr. Martin Luther King and Hodiamont, we encountered a woman with skimpy, stained clothing, who was approaching a car that stopped for her. There was a man inside that she was ready to woo, no doubt. Mama whispered something under her breath as we passed her by. The woman turned around and saw me and grinned.

When we finally boarded the Page Avenue bus and took the five-minute ride to University City, I was crying again.

“Mama, will I ever see Fred again,” he said as they took a seat on the bus.

She avoided the question, but I kept asking, which angered her, so she instead tried to redirect the conversation to grandma. “She gone be happy to see you,” she said plainly.

“Oh lawd. My goodness,” were the first words uttered by grandma when she saw me. It was more of a cry for help than a joyous thank you to God for bringing her precious grandson to her. She was taken aback by the nicks and scratches all over my body. Looking up at her offspring (she used the term offspring when Mama disappointed her), she said slowly, “what happened to my baby?”

Mama rolled her eyes as she dropped her bags of clothing to the ground. She was far from excited to see grandma or to be staying with her again for that matter. “Oh ma’, stop. He’s always scratching himself up outside. It ain’t nothing.”

“Mhm.”

I dropped my backpack and grabbed ahold of grandma’s side. “I’m hungry grandma.”

“Of course you are, sweetie,” she said, managing an accusatory glance at Mama. “Go on in. I’ll fix you a bowl of cereal in a minute.”

Later, I told grandma all about Fred. “I really miss him,” I said. My legs dangled off the wooden chair at the kitchen table.

“Oh really? You’ll make another friend.” She grabbed a bowl and a spoon out of the cabinet.

“I don’t want any other friends. He was it. I want him back.”

Grandma froze. She looked at me curiously. “I don’t think you should go around missing other boys like that,” she finally said. “People might get the wrong idea.”

But I ignored her. I was in his own little world. “Fred real funny too, grandma. He like to tell jokes,” I went on.

Grandma was silent for a few moments before responding dryly with an “Oh really? I bet you got jokes of your own you like to tell too.” She poured the Lucky Charms cereal into the bowl—my favorite.

“Yeah. I always talk about how he’s younger and smaller than me.”

“Now that ain’t nice B.J.” She headed into the living room. “What is your mama doing out here?” She peeled back the blinds covering the window. “No good,” she said, rolling her eyes and sighing.

“Well, it’s true, grandma. I ain’t gone lie to ya.”

Grandma laughed a little, playing along. “Well, I guess that’s right B.J. Don’t lie to me!” Before she could sit down, the door came flying open and Mama rushed in quickly with the bags and dropped all of them on the living room floor. “What in the hell—excuse me B.J.—what do you think you’re doing, offspring?”

Mama didn't even look at her. "I just ran into Tyler. I'll be back later—egg donor."

"Egg donor? Girl, that don't even make sense. Just get lost, alright. And you better not be gone all day neither!" Her comments were useless, though. Mama was already gone before she even uttered a breath.

"Who's Tyler, grandma?"

"Nobody."

I knew Tyler was somebody important—mama didn't get excited for just any ole' person.

Grandma waited up that night for mama, long after she thought I'd went to sleep. Mama waltzed into the house at a quarter past one and plopped down on the couch in the living room. I watched from the hallway.

"For twenty-five years," grandma started as if giving a lecture before a room full of wide-eyed college students. "You have been acting a damn fool. Skipping classes. Smoking weed. Hoeing around with every boy you thought was going somewhere like that Tyler there." She pointed to the door as if Tyler was still out front. "Coming in at all hours of the night, like tonight. Now I let you stay here, because of that boy in there." There was a pause as she pointed to the bedroom where I was supposed to be sleeping. "But don't think for a second that means you can act an ass in my house."

"Oh god. Can you please shut up," Mama said.

“You shut the hell up when I’m talking to you.”

“And Tyler ain’t selling dope no more,” Mama rolled her eyes as she said this. “He about to be drafted.”

“He ain’t getting drafted. I seen that boy play! And you a fool if you think otherwise.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever? Disrespectful little girl! That’s all you are really. A little girl. Raising a little boy.” And it was at this moment that grandma lowered her voice, remembering that I was in the other room.

Mama hopped up and darted into her mama’s face. “I could never be a worse mother than you,” she said.

Grandma slapped her, knocking her down to her knees, making a loud clap that seemed to ricochet off the walls.

I ran into the room and cried out for Fred. “I want Fred! I want Fred!”

Grandma’s eyes widened with guilt. “I’m sorry sweetie,” she said as she tried to console me.

But I wouldn’t accept her touch. “Fred,” I called again.

Mama jumped up and grabbed me as if to shake me. “There is no damn Fred! Do you hear me? He’s imaginary. He ain’t real. Stop acting like you crazy and go to bed.”

“I’m not crazy,” I whispered, wiping the stream of tears from my face. “He’s real. You just can’t see him.” I freed himself from mama’s grasp and walked several steps towards the door before collapsing to the floor.

“Imaginary? Fred ain’t real?”

“Nah, his ass ain’t real! I swear I think something’s wrong with him.”

“It’s your fault. If you would just sit your fast ass down somewhere and show him some attention—just a little bit—he wouldn’t need to make up imaginary friends. All that moving around from house to house ain’t good for a child. And he needs a man in his life. You need to stop chasing these fools and find you a real man.”

I ran outside. I ran and ran and ran, looking for Fred, looking for someplace else to go.